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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of a research project conducted at the University of South Carolina in the 1979-80 academic year. The purpose of the research was to determine whether or not Counseling Learning/Community Language Learning (CLL), an alternative approach to language learning developed by Charles Curran, would influence student anxiety level and subsequent performance in the classroom with greater precision than the audio-lingual approach. The study was begun in the fall semester with one control group and one experimental group in beginning Spanish. After the semester a standardized measure was used to determine the level of language mastery of each group. In the CLL group the students' ideas became the nucleus from which all class activities evolved. The teacher acted as a group-learning facilitator. A distinctive feature of the method was the reflection period held at the end of each class during which students shared difficulties they were having. It seemed that the revelation itself helped to reduce anxieties and aid learning. Although the results obtained did not substantiate the original hypothesis that students would perform more effectively if they were less anxious, they did indicate positive attitudes on students' part. There was substantially less attrition in the experimental group than in the control group. (Author/AMH)

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TEACHING AND LEARNING LANGUAGE BEYOND THE "COMFORT ZONE"

by Charles J. Alber, Lizette M. Laughlin, Frank W. Medley, Jr.

In his keynote address to the 1981 ACTFL conference, U. S. Teacher of the Year Jay Sommer observed that no proper learning takes place under tense circumstances (Sommer, 1981). Other foreign language teachers have maintained that if anxiety in the classroom is reduced, the student's ability to learn and/or perform will improve as a result (McCoy, 1976; Jones, 1977; Taylor, 1977). Yet researchers have demonstrated that the performance of high anxious students varies with intelligence (Denny, 1963), complexity of task (Goodstein, SpielLerger, Williams & Dahlstrom, 1955) and, most important of all, with ego-involvement (Spielberger & Smith, 1966). For easy tasks, high anxiety may actually facilitate learning at certain stages of the learning process. Generally speaking, however, high levels of anxiety must be considered debilitating. Determining the adverse effects of anxiety on foreign language learning and redesigning the curriculum to reduce debilitating anxiety may involve a whole host of variables, including the very classroom itself (Gardner, Smythe, Clement & Gliksman, 1976). Anxiety may well be, as one researcher suggested, like a "low grade fever" that is symptomatic of far more fundamental problems in our approach to language teaching and learning (Dowling & Shephard, 1976).

Research into the teaching of reading in the native language has determined that a person's performance in the use of the written form spans three areas: independent, instructional, and frustration (Harris & Sipay, 1975). As the reader matures intellectually and experientially, material that was once frustrating becomes appropriate for instructional purposes, and finally can be handled independently by the student. This process

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of skill development is generally recognized as "learning," and is perceived as an outgrowth of instruction, study, and practive.

A parallel might be drawn between reading in one's own language and mastering a second language, with respect to the three levels at which the student functions. At the independent level, activities are familiar to the learner, vocabulary is not new, and the student is able to perform the tasks expected of him with little or no guidance and/or assistance. In other words, the student is operating within his "comfort zone," although he is not adding appreciably to his skill or knowledge. As the student moves into the independent level, he encounters new material, but with the proper structuring of activities, study, and assistance from the teacher, he can maintain an acceptable level of performance and at the same time add to his base of knowledge and increase his skill in the use of the language.

The frustration level is the lowest level at which the student's language ability breaks down. He does not comprehend the language used in the classroom and is unable to participate satisfactorily in a communicative situation. Signs of discomfort begin to appear--open animosity toward the teacher and the class may surface, and a disdainful attitude develops toward the language and those who speak it. Finally, students drop out of the course altogether.

A number of factors seem to determine the point at which a person moves from the independent to the instructional level, and from the instructional to the frustration level. And it should be noted also that all people (beyond infancy) have a level at which they are frustrated linguistically, as well as a level at which they are able to function independently, unless physiological or neurological factors are involved. For the native

speaker, the technicality of the vocabulary and the degree of familiarity with the topic under discussion seem to be important factors that determine the relative ease with which he can enter into a conversation and contribute to it. Of lesser importance to the native speaker is the situation in which the language is being used (social, business, classroom, etc.), regional differences (pronunciation, idioms), sentence complexity, and cultural referrants.

When a person is learning a second language, however, the factors that force him out of his "comfort zone" of independent use are more numerous. In addition to vocabulary and topic, the learner may experience difficulty as a result of the situation in which the language is being used (e.g. spontaneous conversation instead of the more familiar drill formats), or as a result of unexpected variations in pronunciation. Similarly, complex sentence structure or a lack of understanding of the cultural referrants of the language can remove all meaning from the interchange (Seelye, 1974).

Obviously, one student's frustration level will be another's instructional or independent level, since there will be variations in the background of the learner, and in the amount of study being put into the course by the individual. However, one factor that might be controlled by the teacher is the extent to which the student feels threatened by the classroom activities. Although the student may be outside his "comfort zone," certain anxiety-allaying activities can encourage him to persist in his efforts to relate the new material and instruction to previously mastered tasks, and thus to build on prior knowledge. Errors occur, and comprehension and recall are somewhat restricted as a result of the increasing complexity of the language being used in the classroom. But

it is this mild anxiety, this stretching of abilities, that results in a more competent use of the language. In effect, learning occurs as a result of the intellectual demands placed upon the student.

Two strategies of instruction have evolved in the last several years that incorporate activities designed to reduce the anxiety students experience in the classroom. Curran (1972) describes an approach, generally referred to as Community Language Learning (CLL), in which the teacher plays the role of counselor or coach rather than instructor. An important element of the procedure is the student's own ego-involvement in the language learning process. At first he speaks only in English, and his own language is then translated into that of the teacher. A record is kept of the transactions and is studied by the group as a form of textbook.

The second approach is Suggestive-Accelerative Learning and Teaching, more commonly referred to by the acronym SALT, and based on the work of the Bulgarian psychologist Georgi Lozanov (Bancroft, 1977). SALT was designed originally to combat anxiety, and places heavy emphasis on the environment in which the student learns. Music (the "concert") and relaxation (the "seance") are as important as teacher encouragement in getting the student to achieve far beyond his normal level.

In an effort to determine whether or not specific approaches and activities would influence student anxiety level and subsequent performance in the classroom, a study was conceived to be implemented in beginning Spanish classes at the University of South Carolina. Originally, the research design called for a control group, a CLL group, and a SALT group. However, the SALT portion of the study was not implemented since neither the necessary physical facilities nor the Spanish-language materials were available to

the researchers. The study was begun in the Fall semester, with one control group and one experimental group. The groups were selected at random, and the same instructor was assigned to teach both groups. Statistical procedures performed on pre-treatment data confirmed the homogeneity of the groups, both of which were drawn from those sections of beginning Spanish populated exclusively with students with no prior study or background in the language. The controlled variables were the method and materials used in the classroom. Following the one-semester experimental period, a standardized measure was used to determine the level of language mastery of each group.

In all, the groups were compared on the basis of pre- and post-tests on snxiety, on attitude, on mastery of the language, and on attrition. Surprisingly, there was no significant difference on any measure except attrition. All except one of the experimental group (N=22) who began the year completed the second semester, while nine of the control group (N=23) dropped out along the way. This led the researchers to consider the possibility that although students might be sufficiently well task oriented to perform satisfactorily, the naturally occurring stress of the traditional classroom manifested itself in a high dropout rate, while in the experimental classroom students relieved the pressure through the planned, anxiety-allaying techniques.

In the traditional classroom, students followed a departmental syllabus and worked through the prescribed text, Comunicando (Stillman & Gordon, For the most part, activities and exercises were dictated by the time frame of the syllabus and the dates on which departmental exams were administered. In addition to four major examinations, two oral interviews were conducted with each student. Final grades were computed using a formula developed by the course coordinator and applied by each instructor.

In the CLL group, the language learning was initiated by soliciting phrases and ideas from the students. The facilitator (teacher) translated the phrase or idea orally. The students were asked to repeat the phrase in Spanish, and to write it on the chalk board. The facilitator would then write the sentence on the board, using correct spelling and punctuation, and would repeat the phrase orally, as well. The students copied the phrase and repeated it orally in Spanish. The final product of the routine was the students' original phrases written in Spanish in their own handwriting. This format, which was used throughout the experimental period, deviated from the Curran model in that he initially taped all exchanges and later had his students transcribe them.

The students' ideas became the nucleus from which all class activities evolved. Each sentence was taken apart by having students make index cards for each one of the words. The Spanish was written on one side and the English on the other. In the case of verbs, the person and tense were noted. At all times grammar explanations were kept at a minimum.

At the end of each class, time was allowed for reflection by the students on what had taken place in class that day. At first the students were hesitant to participate. Later however, this became a crucial part of the class, and a tremendous benefit to both the students and the teacher. This activity allowed the students to share any difficulties and insecurities they were experiencing in language learning. The revelation in itself relieved anxiety in the students, who realized that they were not alone in feeling tense in class. Furthermore, the comments provided a constant source of direction for the teacher. For example, "I'm confused" usually meant additional practice was needed on a particular grammar point. The practice also served to reinforce those activities that were helpful and meaningful to the students. At times, this reflection was done in writing

and anonymously to allow full participation and to reduce the pressure some individuals may have experienced while criticizing an activity initiated by the instructor. It was during this activity that the role of the counselor became so important. The facilitator had to listen actively to the students' comments, rephrasing them at times, yet never reacting to or commenting on them.

Frequently, there were periods in which the students paired off and practiced new and old vocabulary. They took turns pronouncing and translating the Spanish words. This proved to be a very valuable exercise which helped the students become closer and more supportive of each other. At times they were asked to regroup the vocabulary words on index cards to form new sentences.

In one activity that allowed the students to get additional practice in pronunciation and meaning, the facilitator played the role of a computer. The students held up a card with a blue question mark for pronunciation and a green question mark for meaning. With all of the Spanish sentences on the board, each student would raise the necessary card whenever additional practice was required. This served to satisfy the needs of those who wanted extra practice.

In addition to taping the sentences and including additional listening exercises in the lab, the teacher wrote dialogues and stories with the students' sentences. The students listened to these and reacted to them with blue/green computer cards. A few weeks into the course the students were asked to write their own dialogues and stories, which they shared with the class.

Although grammar explanations were kept to a minimum, they were a necessary part of the classroom instruction. When additional practice

was needed, old oral drills and worksheets were used. Also, games that could reinforce a certain grammar point were useful for additional practice.

Culture was constantly introduced into the class activities. Dialogues written by the teacher many times included cultural references to hispanic society.

Since all skills were emphasized in class, they were included in the tests. All formal tests included listening, writing, and reading sections. Also, oral exams were given on an individual basis several times during the semester.

The relaxed atmosphere in the classroom nurtured a close-knit group of students that were very supportive of each other both in and out of the classroom. When time for oral exams came around, several students would get together to practice and to help each other.

Since the students' ideas were used as the point of departure for each lesson, the retention rate was high. The students were more apt to remember their own ideas in Spanish rather than a totally irrelevant and meaningless dialogue.

The reflection phase is a device that might well be incorporated into all classes. It is a means by which the students can inform the instructor of how effective the class activities are in helping them to learn the foreign language. After all, each group of students has different needs, and the idea of always teaching a certain idea or grammar point the same way seems ineffective when one considers the individual differences in each group. Crucial to the success of this phase, however, is the willingness of the teacher to make necessary changes in classroom format, as suggested by the students.

The idea of teaching grammar as it is needed by the students to communicate provides an element of authenticity to language learning. At the same time, it allowed creative freedom of expression on the part of the students, since they did not have to "wait" to master a specific structure. Furthermore, the idea of beginning a language course by teaching students how to say what they wanted to say seemed reasonable and desirable. Students learned what was necessary for communication. For example, they were using the preterite tense in the first weeks of class rather than in the second semester of instruction, when it is normally taught.

The main disadvantage to the CLL approach was the tremendous amount of work for the instructor. Since the students' ideas serve as the center of all classroom activity, it is impossible to do much advance preparation. Therefore, there is a lot of work to be done on a daily basis in order to prepare properly for class. All dialogues, stories, and tests have to be prepared to include the vocabulary found in the students' ideas. This type of creative effort on a daily basis is very demanding and can result in professional burnout if maintained for an extended period of time.

In addition, class progress has to be constantly assessed. At times, certain vocabulary, phrases, and grammar points were introduced by the instructor because they were considered to be a necessary elaboration of the students' original ideas in order to better facilitate communication. In other words, there was a sense of professional responsibility that had to be exercised when needed.

Finally, one drawback to the program was that the number of contact hours had to conform to the number of hours spent in the regular classes. Curran intended for this approach to be used in an intensive program

where the students met every day for several hours. It is easy to see how this would improve the program, given the additional time for practice and conversation.

In conclusion, from the instructor's point of view, the results of using the CLL approach were extremely rewarding. In the first place, the opportunity to satisfy the students' linguistic and emotional needs at the same time resulted in an atmosphere that was more conducive to language learning. Teaching language at an ope ional level was both demanding and rewarding. The amount of preparation needed for the program to be effective was necessary to produce the desired results. The students learned what they wanted to learn--they played an active role in their own language education, determining what, and at what pace they learned. And most importantly, all but one of the students enrolled in Spanish the following semester.

Although the results obtained did not substantiate the original hypothesis that students would perform more effectively if they were less anxious, one possible solution to excessive attrition may have been found. It is worth noting that in the section where the students themselves took primary responsibility for the learning process and the teacher acted primarily as an informant, a greater desire to continue the study of Spanish was engendered. It would appear, then, that when students begin to motivate themselves and to follow their own inborn sense of curiosity, learning takes place naturally, in the instructional area that exists beyond the "Comfort zone."

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